

LIFE AFTER DEATH

After the murder of her son, Allen Schindler, and the sentencing of his killer, Terry Helvey, to life in prison, Dorothy Hajdys emerges from a mother's worst nightmare as a woman with a cause—gay rights.

By Mark Schoofs

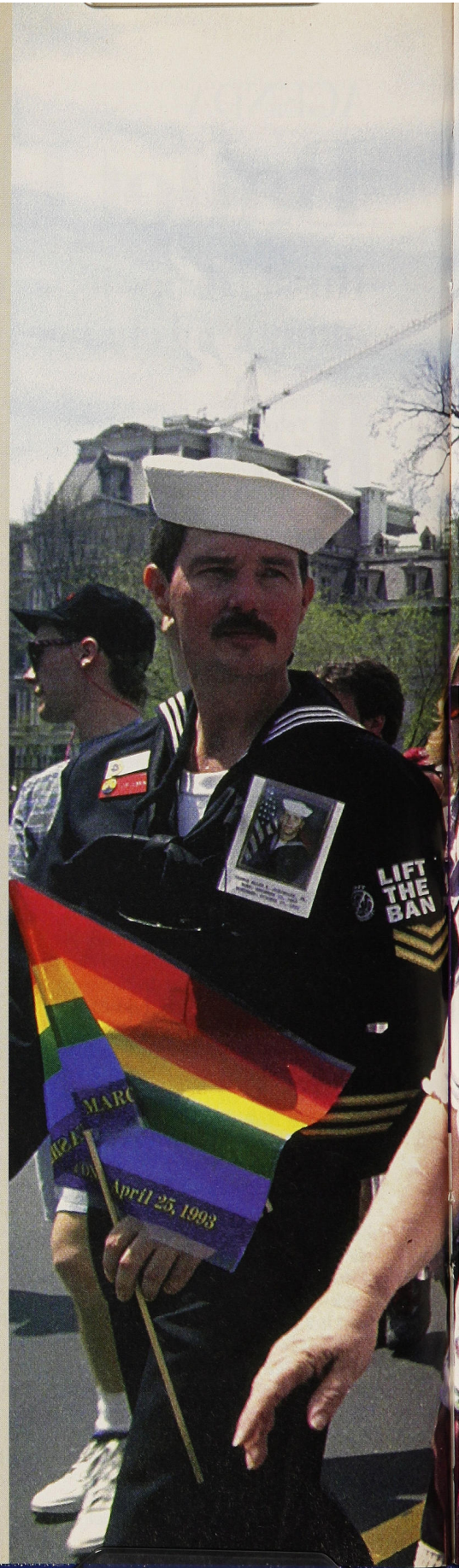
IT'S THE DAY before Mother's Day, and Dorothy Hajdys is driving to the grave of her son. She's talking about him, remembering how from the time he was a kid he always collected animals: turtles, parrots, a rabbit, a chinchilla, and an aquarium full of garden snakes. But his favorites were a couple of monitor lizards, a prehistoric species that grows to be four feet long, that he smuggled home on a plane in his bib overalls about two years before he died.

"They eat live mice, OK? *Live* mice. And of course he leaves them home with Mom to take care of once he leaves." One lizard died, but when her son was home, he would parade the remaining one around the neighborhood like a prize poodle. "I mean, he would put a leash on it and take it outside on the sidewalk for a walk. Or he'd wrap it up in a blanket and take it with him to the bank." She chuckles at the memory, but she's reached the cemetery now and has to struggle to focus on happier times. "When he was killed and we went to the bank to close his checking account, they said, 'We know who your son is. He's the one who brought the monitor lizard in.'"

It's probably not how those tellers would identify Schindler now. Then, only days after his death, he was just a sailor killed in a fight. But three of Schindler's gay buddies knew better, and they urged the military newspaper *Pacific Stars and Stripes* to investigate whether their friend was murdered because he was gay. Six weeks after Schindler's death—and a day before what would have been his 23rd birthday—the paper broke the story that, indeed, all evidence pointed to a gay bashing.

Immediately Schindler became the media's poster boy for the violent

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On leave

Schindler indulges his lifelong love of exotic animals in Hawaii in September 1991.

emotions surrounding the debate over gays and lesbians in the military. And his mom, a Norman Rockwell-esque Midwesterner and lifelong member of the Salvation Army, the fundamentalist Christian church and charitable organization, became one of the nation's most unlikely but impassioned voices for gay rights.

"She blows away 98% of the gay activists," says Art Johnston, himself a prominent gay activist in Chicago. Johnston recruited Hajdys in the fight to pass Illinois's gay rights bill and says with awe, "She tells those representatives, 'I'm not a gay activist, I'm a mother. And I'm here to tell you a story.'"

"On Oct. 26—Allen had called me that evening, and he had told me he had seen a lawyer and he was getting out of the Navy. He didn't tell me why, just that he would be home for good before Christmas. At 7:15 the next evening, I have two sailors come to my door in dress blues and tell me that my son had been assaulted in a park in Sase-

bo, Japan, and that he was dead."

She has left the rectangle of broken earth under which her son lies, surrounded by the graves of many family members, including one of her brothers and her second husband, Schindler's stepfather. Her own plot lies just a few feet from her son's. "The hardest thing," she says, getting back into her car, "is to lose one of your children." She starts crying, sitting at the wheel with her door swung open. But driving home she is composed.

"Two days later, the casualty assistance officer came out and gave me this check for the gratuity and told me that Allen's body was in Okinawa having an autopsy. They told me that 48 hours after the autopsy was completed he would be in Travis Air Force Base in California and that his personal belongings would accompany him, which was a big joke." Schindler's effects, even photographs of his nieces and nephews, were held as evidence.

"Forty-eight hours passed, and I tried calling this casualty assistance officer. He wouldn't return my calls. Another day passed, and he wouldn't return my calls. All I wanted to know was where my son's body was.

"Then on Monday, six days after he was killed, I had another casualty assistance officer call me and take over the case. He called back an hour later and told me that Allen's body was in Hawaii, but they didn't know how long it was going to be there. They were waiting for a plane that was coming to the States." She shakes her head, and her voice becomes wry with disbelief. "I mean, they didn't do a special thing of putting it on a plane and shipping it right to the States. They stopped it wherever the plane stopped and left the body there until another plane went the rest of the way."

But Hajdys's biggest frustration was the Navy's resolute silence. "Until this time, I had no idea how Allen was killed. I didn't know if he was shot, if he was stabbed. I didn't know if he hit the back of his head. They never told me a cause. Never."

In an attempt to break through the stonewalling and "find out something," Hajdys asked whether the cas-

ket could be open. "The night Allen was killed, when I was told he was killed, I was a nervous wreck. I was crying and screaming and everything. But the night they told me there was no way they would open the coffin and let anyone see his body, they had to give me tranquilizers, because it was worse than the first night.

"When I went to the funeral home the next day to view Allen's body, my minister tried to talk me out of going in and seeing him. He had been a marine, my minister, and he had seen a lot of fights and stuff. And he's been a minister for 34 years, and he's seen a lot of dead people. He had never seen a body destroyed the way Allen was destroyed just by someone using his hands or feet. His whole face was caved in. His whole face was destroyed. This didn't look anything like my son whatsoever. And I, I wanted to hug him and kiss him, and I wasn't even sure it was my son."

Hajdys has pulled up to the curb in front of a small house, but she makes no move to get out of the car. "Then my brother demanded that he close the coffin immediately, because he felt that I would have bad dreams and that I would see this terrible body all the time when I go to sleep and stuff. But I've never been able to see that terrible body. And I believe that's because when I talked to Allen just before he was killed, I told him four times that I loved him. And I believe that I can't see that terrible body because everything was perfect between me and Allen. And Allen knew how much his mom loved him, and anything could happen and he knew his mom was there for him. And she's still there fighting for him."

Now she opens the car door, and says, "This is where I live."

Chicago Heights, a working-class town 25 miles south of Chicago, is where Hajdys has lived all her life. Since Schindler's death she has made 12 trips by plane, including one to Japan for the sentencing of his killer. Before her son died she had traveled by plane only twice. She is 47 years old.

Hajdys's high school diploma, received from the same school all four of her children attended, marks the peak of her formal education. "I graduated in June," she recalls, "and got married in November." Five years later, her husband had to quit his job because of a back injury, and Hajdys started working to supplement his workers' compensation checks. Two years after that, she was supporting her husband and their three kids all by herself. "I would get up in the morning and get the girls off to school and go to work at Burger King at 10 in the morning, and my aunt would watch Allen. I'd get off work at 2:30 from Burger King and go to John's Frozen Pizza factory and work, then I'd get home between 12 and 1 in the morning. I'd take a bath and go to bed and then get up in the morning and get the kids off to school and go back to work again."

She kept this schedule for three years, earning a top salary of "almost \$7 an hour—and for a woman to

worked as a bookkeeper at the Salvation Army, the church to which her Lutheran parents converted before she was born. She still works long days, leading several volunteer groups on weeknights and on Saturday mornings and teaching Sunday school before the weekly service.

Returning to the subject of Schindler, Hajdys says, "Allen told me three years ago that he was gay. And we believed that he was confused. There was a time when I told him that I wished he'd never joined the Navy so that he would've never went to San Diego and he would've never met those weird people and thought he was like them. And you know, that was what my opinion was of homosexuals—that they were weird people. Because all you think about is the stereotype.

"I have a hard time dealing with some things, like when they put on the news that Jim Jennings was Allen's lover, OK? I can deal with that he was his boyfriend. And I'm getting where I can say 'lover,' kinda. But I can't kinda too. It's just it's hard to go through everything and go through that too. So out of respect to me, Jim Jennings does not say anymore that him and Allen were lovers. He says that Allen was his boyfriend."

Later, at her kitchen table, Hajdys talks more about Jennings. She had heard her son talk about him but had never met or spoken with him and didn't have his phone number. So Jennings learned that Schindler had been killed from the evening news. He tracked down Hajdys's phone number and invited her to come to San Diego for a memorial service.

"When he called me he was crying—I guess he had cried for three days after he found out Allen was killed." Still, Hajdys kept her distance. "I thought maybe he was part of the reason my son was homosexual. I guess I kind of believed that they put this in my son's mind, that they brainwashed him. I was nice to Jim, and I agreed to come to California, but the closer the day got to leave, the more scared I was.

"My biggest person that I had ever known who you'd think was homosexual was Klinger from *M*A*S*H*,



Home front

Schindler grew up in Chicago Heights in the house where his mother still lives.

make \$7 an hour was a lot of money." During this time her husband suffered a nervous breakdown, and he and Hajdys divorced. A year later she married Frank Hajdys, with whom she had her youngest child, Billy.

For the past ten years, she has

and you know how crazy he is, always dressing up in dresses. The thing that kept going through my mind on the plane to California was, 'What am I getting myself into?'

"Then I arrived at the airport, and he wanted to hug me, and I put my hand out to *barely* shake his hand. There's no way this gay guy is going to touch me, no way."

Jennings drove Hajdys to her hotel, but a reporter accompanying her got lost. "So for two hours I'm stuck in this room with this homosexual, no one but me or him. And it gave me time for me to realize that he really loved my son and that he wasn't weird." She laughs and adds, "He didn't have no dress on!"

"You got to realize too that at this here memorial service, all these homosexuals are coming up to me and hugging me, and I'm kinda accepting it more. By the time we got to the airport that evening to leave, I didn't shake hands with Jim, I hugged him. I told him if he ever gets enough nerve to come to this cold city where we have that white stuff from the sky, he's got a place to stay. So just in those couple days, my view on homosexuals started to change."

A little more than three months later, Hajdys stood before history's largest gathering of homosexuals, the march on Washington, and delivered one of the day's most stirring speeches. As always, she spoke without notes or preparation of any kind. "I speak from my heart," she explains. "I've been told that it means more."

She also speaks from her grief. Indeed, she speaks as a way to grieve. There was a period when she didn't talk about her trauma, and she suffered "terrible headaches." Her doctor prescribed tranquilizers. "Then I did an interview, and the next day I went to a news conference, and I didn't have to take any more tranquilizers. My headache went away. And I haven't shut up since then!"

Some of her neighbors wish she would. "There's two people who are very religious who have known me all my life who won't have anything hardly to do with me. One person won't speak to me. They're people from the church, but the one woman doesn't even come to church no more because I still go."

Most folks, even in the Salvation Army, aren't intolerant so much as

uncomfortable, as Hajdys herself is on some issues. "It's not that I'm defending the sexual act, that's not what I'm defending. I think that's wrong. But God's word tells us it's wrong to have sex outside of marriage." And since all kinds of "sinners" are allowed to serve in the military, rent apartments, and hold jobs, so too, she figures, should gays: "They're not asking for special things."

What about marriage? If Schindler had wanted to marry a man, would she have supported it? "All I ever wanted in my life was for my kids to be happy. And if that would have made him happy—" She doesn't finish the sentence. "I don't know. I really can't tell you. It wasn't until I was pushed into all this that I realized what homosexuality was all about. I'm still not sure if I understand it all, but I know Jim Jennings hurts as much as anybody else would hurt."

Hajdys also knows her Bible: "Sure, it says that it's wrong for man to sleep with man. But it's also wrong for man to commit adultery, and one of these people who won't talk to me, her son was a minister and committed adultery and was kicked out of the church because of it. Yet we stood beside her and supported her through the whole thing."

"If you wanted to go back into biblical things, in the Old Testament it states that it's wrong for a woman to cut her hair because your hair is your beauty. How many women go their whole life without cutting their hair? Isn't that wrong? A woman isn't to dress as a man. How many women go to church with slacks on? You're not supposed to go into church without your head covered, that's wrong."

"It's like in Matthew it says, 'Judge not that ye be not judged.' How can you take the sliver out of your neighbor's eye when you have a big plank in it yourself?"

"When Jesus came, Jesus gave us a new commandment, and that's to love our neighbor as ourself. And then they asked Jesus, 'Well, who's your neighbor?' And Jesus—I'm just putting it in nowadays language—Jesus says, 'You have to love everyone you come in contact with.'"

Her voice rises. "It also means that I have to love Terry Helvey, OK?" Helvey, who pleaded guilty to Schindler's murder, confessed to "stomping" his victim to death. "I

have to love him 10% for Jesus' sake. And I think I've come a long way, because I don't want him put to death. I don't want his mother to have to go through what I'm going through. I could be bitter, so bitter as to say, 'I want him put to death, and I want to pull the switch.'" She stares for a moment across the kitchen table. "But I don't."

On May 27, after four days of testimony in front of a military court in Sasebo, Japan, Helvey was sentenced to life in prison. Hajdys was present throughout the hearing, but she kept a tight rein on her emotions, knowing that any outburst could affect an appeal. So when it was over, "I requested a meeting with Helvey because I wasn't able to say things to him that I really wanted to say."

Mother and murderer met in a private room for five minutes. "I explained to him how he had ruined my life. I told him that I have an 8-year-old granddaughter and she cries about how Allen is dead. 'What did Uncle Allen ever do to anybody?' she asks. How do you explain to an 8-year-old what you can't explain to yourself? She's afraid now when her mom and dad go somewhere that someone will do to them what he did to Allen. She used to take Uncle Allen's picture to bed with her, and we've just gotten it so that she'll let his picture be on her nightstand. I told him that I just wanted him to think about that as he sat in jail."

"Then I asked him what Allen had ever done to him. He said nothing, that Allen hadn't ever done nothing to him. So I asked why he beat him, and he still couldn't give me a reason. His head was bowed down, and he wouldn't look me in the eye."

The meeting ended when Helvey's mother entered the room. "I said to Helvey that since January I didn't want him put to death. And with his mom there, I told him, 'At least she can tell you that she loves you and can visit you. I can't do that for Allen.' And Helvey's mom, she never showed any emotion. I can't understand that, and I can't understand why she let him suffer all that abuse." During the testimony, it was revealed that Helvey had been physically as-

The last picture

Schindler and Hajdys at O'Hare International Airport two months before his murder.



saulted by his father.

"Part of me felt sorry for him because of the way he was abused as a child. But I still can't understand why anyone would beat Allen the way he beat Allen. The Navy doctor testified that Helvey's blows had the effect of a crash in a low-speed plane or a high-speed car. I'm glad he's put away for life."

Hajdys's anger keeps bubbling sporadically but insistently through the fissures of her composure. Partly she's angry at the Navy for refusing to admit formally—or at least to her directly—that her son's death was a gay bashing. Since Helvey pleaded guilty to the charges, the hearing addressed only his sentence and never filled in all the facts of his crime.

After the sentencing, testimony given to investigators by Helvey's accomplice, Charles E. Vins, was made public. It revealed that he and Helvey had stalked and then attacked Schindler in large part because he was gay, lending credence to Hajdys's contention that the Navy knew the truth all along.

In her kitchen, before learning of Vins's testimony, Hajdys explained her anger at the Navy: "Richard Eastman, another sailor on the ship, had been beaten in the face the day before Allen was killed and was told, 'Fag, get off this ship or you'll

be dead,' and 24 hours later Allen was dead. He was taken off the ship immediately after Allen's death because they feared for his life. They knew why Allen was killed. They kept that from me."

She had kept asking the Navy why Allen had wanted to see a lawyer. Finally, as *Pacific Stars and Stripes* was getting hotter on the story and after she had asked three times in one phone conversation, the Navy told her that Schindler had seen a lawyer for help with his disclosure that he was gay. "That was on Dec. 7, which was six weeks after Allen was killed. At six weeks I still didn't know anything. During that six weeks they made a deal with someone, and they sentenced him to one year in jail, which they reduced to four months in return for his testimony."

That person was Vins, the accomplice. In return for testimony against Helvey, the Navy accepted Vins's guilty plea to resisting arrest and failing to report a serious crime. Navy investigators now concede that he was an active participant in Schindler's murder, not just a witness.

Says Hajdys: "I feel like they slapped Vins on the hands and said, 'You're a bad boy. You really shouldn't have killed that gay guy. You really shouldn't have witnessed it and not told nobody. Well, what difference does it make? He was just gay.' That's how I feel about it."

And then there was the testimony

by a third sailor, later revoked, that Schindler had had an affair with Helvey. "I knew that was lies. In the first place, all of Allen's friends in San Diego said if Allen had an affair with someone, he had to be a small person and he had to have blue eyes, and in Allen's journal he talks about blues eyes all the time. He had a thing for people with blue eyes. There is no way he would have any interest in Helvey. Helvey was 6 foot 4, 240 pounds; he was way bigger than Allen. Anyone Allen was interested in was more feminine, that's what his friends have said. I knew it was lies. And I'm glad that Helvey admitted that the statements he made that Allen came in with his pants unzipped—and he wasn't sure if Allen's penis was

erect or not but Allen was going to try to do something to him—that that was lies."

In her voice, anger mixes with disdain: "My son was a better man than either one of them. My son would have never done to them what they done to him."

She brings out a photo album and leafs through it. A towhead with blue eyes and big ears smiles at the camera. A few pages later, he's grown into a strapping, handsome man with a glint of mischief in his still-boyish smile and tattoos on both his forearms. "That's a shark," she says, pointing to one of them, "this is the tiger, and then on the other arm is the emblem of the USS *Midway*."

It was the tattoos that reconciled her to the fact that, indeed, her son was gone. "They sealed the coffin, and we had the wake. And all during the wake I'm going, *How do I know that's Allen?* But I knew there was no way that I could go back in there and open that coffin again and see that terrible body. And about 8 that night—the wake was till 9—Kathy came up to me and says, 'Mom, there's something I have to ask you. I have to ask you to let me have them open the coffin again so that I can go look at his arms or I'm never going to know that's Allen.' And she had enough nerve to do it."

After all this, what does Hajdys want now? "I want gay people to have rights. I want my life to be normal, though I guess my life is never

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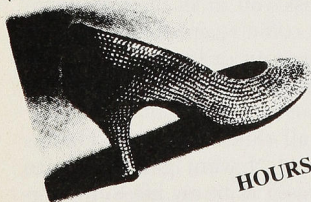
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going to be the same as it was. I just want an end to all this hatred."

It's 9:45 on Mother's Day morning, and Hajdys, who has already visited her son's grave again, is standing before the altar in the Salvation Army chapel, leading a group of parishioners in song. She sings off-key but enthusiastically.

Later that day, at the time when most mothers are sitting down to a dinner that for once they won't have to cook, Hajdys will be boarding a plane bound for Norfolk, Va. There she will ask to testify before Sam Nunn's Senate armed services committee hearings on lifting the ban, but like many other opponents of the ban, she will be turned down. Which means the committee won't hear her say what she had said the day before: "I think they got to ask people before they enlist if they got homophobia. They need to talk to these commanding officers if they have homophobia rather than if they're homosexual."

What did she think of Sam Nunn? "He's a bigot. I think he should resign from the Senate. You know what I think about [Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Colin] Powell saying he'll resign? I think that would be great, because he's got homophobia, and if you have homophobia you don't need to be in there. Maybe this needs to happen to them for them to realize what life's all about. Allen could have been anyone's son, but it ended up he was mine. Any one of them could have a son or daughter who could end up homosexual. As a matter of fact, I've heard rumors that Powell's daughter is a lesbian and that's one of the reasons he has all these hard feelings, 'cause he can't accept her."

And if these rumors were true, what would she tell Powell? "That you need to love her for what she is. God gave her to you, and I've always been taught that God don't make no mistakes. And you better love her before she ends up to be like Allen."

In the chapel Hajdys is singing and clapping through the song's last verse. When it ends, she thanks the piano player, praises the singing of two children in front, and then leads the morning meditation: "A mother who loves God is a mother who's understanding," she begins. "She doesn't always agree with what her children do. But she loves them." ●